

THE PRESENT CONDITION OF INDIA

Government the land belonged to the peasant, to-day only too often exorbitant rents are extorted from him. In U.P. and Behar a veritable class-war has developed between Kisan and Zemindar. But it must be remembered that on *ryotwari* land the Zemindar is a peasant proprietor, though the weight of land revenue and the alienation of land through debt is making even the lot of the peasants of this kind very miserable.¹

The Report of the U.P. Provincial Congress Committee issued in 1931 is still worth studying. It was issued not long after the Gandhi-Irwin Agreement. Prices had never touched so low a level as at this time, lower than in the period between 1896 and 1900. The very foundations of rural economy were shaken; even the privileged and occu-

¹ *The Zemindari System*.—All authorities agree that during the Hindu and Mohammedan periods the legal ownership of the land belonged either to the State or to the cultivator, or to the village community. Middlemen between the cultivator and the State did exist, but they had no absolute proprietary rights in land. Most of them were mere revenue collectors. They were entrusted with this responsibility by the Government on return for a prescribed remuneration in the form of a percentage of the total revenue collected by them.

Revenue farmers were found all over the Mogul Empire but with the decline of the Empire and the consequent weakness of the central government they grew in number and made themselves the virtual owners of the land under their control. Few of them were of the old aristocracy of the land. Most of them were men of no distinction who had taken advantage of the troubled times, sometimes by fraud, sometimes by deeds of sale or violence, to become the nominal proprietors.

When the British assumed political power they found the proprietary rights in land in a state of chaotic confusion. In Bengal, Behar, U.P. and North Madras they recognised the Zemindars or *taluqdars* as the real proprietors, thereby gaining the loyal allegiance of a considerable class of "landlords," as now these middlemen considered themselves. In some parts the Government entered into direct revenue agreements with the cultivators. Under the Zemin-dari system the peasantry suffered as the Zemindars had great power, and a chain of tenants and sub-tenants grew up who squeezed the cultivator to the utmost. Rack-renting and forceable evictions became common. The Government passed a few tenancy laws, but these were often evaded. We have seen what is the position to-day. In the *ryotwari* areas, for reasons given above, land is passing into the hands of big landlords or moneylenders.

The Madras Government, generally regarded as the most moderate of the Congress Ministries, has been rushing through the legislature a Rural Indebtedness Bill which its opponents have attacked as "expropriatory and revolutionary." It is neither; but it shows how vigilant are the vested interests to detect anything which may weaken their position.